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Beyond Exclusivism: A Vital Plea

by Lynn Mitchell

**DO WE HAVE THE TRUTH?
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For the person of faith, there should be no doubt about the reality of absolute truth. The word “absolute” is not a biblical word, and one certainly should be careful about using non-biblical terms to talk about biblical truths. But the term can, I think, be translated in biblical ideas. In the Bible, the *Absolute* has a personal name. The *Absolute*, I believe, is the one true and living God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ. I believe all truth is related to him and in at least that sense, relative. I believe God is personal; he is subject (not object). I am also a subject and not purely an object. In that sense, at least, truth is subjective. “Relativism” and “subjectivism” do not necessarily result from the belief that truth is relative and subjective. “Relativism” and “subjectivism” arise from the assumption that there is no absolute and/or that truth is merely a conceit of human beings and is not related to the *Absolute*, the true and living God. By definition, therefore, no

worshipper of the true and living God could be a “relativist” or a “subjectivist.” If there is no such thing as absolute truth, then God is not true. The Christian affirms: “Let God be true, though every man a liar” (Rom. 3:4).

I begin with this unwieldy mixture of confession and philosophical language to dispense immediately with a red herring. I intend in this article to affirm that Churches of Christ have the right to continue to exist even if we abandon exclusive truth claims. I want it to be understood from the beginning, therefore, that abandoning claims of exclusive truth does not result in the abandonment of belief in absolute truth. The reality of absolute or perfect truth might be acknowledged by people who understand they (i.e., as people) are not absolute in any way and are, therefore, intellectually or morally incapable of knowing truth absolutely or perfectly. Such an acknowledgment of finitude, I would suggest, is a frightening prospect only to those who believe for some reason their salvation is contingent upon their knowing truth absolutely or perfectly. This belief in salvation by intellectual prowess is so unbiblical and unchristian that its denial can certainly be distinguished from “relativism” or “subjectivism.”

In fact, many Christians throughout the ages have been able to distinguish between truth as it is in God and truth as it is apprehended by even the most intelligent and spiritual of human beings. A human being, they have understood, may know

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absolute truth, but only in a fragmentary, finite (non-absolute) way. Christian theologians have even recognized the further handicaps represented by the fallenness of the human being, which means knowledge of the truth is further complicated by idolatrous and self-deceptive tendencies.¹

Biblically and theologically speaking, it is impossible to claim belief in absolute truth, and at the same time, claim to "have" exclusive truth. If one believes there is absolute truth and absolute truth is the true and living God, then one could consistently claim to participate in the truth, to be related to the truth, or to be possessed by the truth. One might even be so bold as to claim to possess the truth in a fragmentary or tentative way. But surely one cannot biblically claim to "possess" the truth unambiguously or to have exclusive possession of the truth either individually or in concert with other human beings however brilliant or spiritual. Such a claim would be idolatrous on the face of it.

If we are prone to claiming exclusive truth, therefore, our problem is very basic: we have confused the plan of salvation with the very thing from which we must be saved. We have trouble, then, distinguishing idolatry from faithfulness—a very unfortunate situation.

The Churches of Christ are regularly accused of legalism.² I will not argue with this except to say I do not believe legalism is our most characteristic "heresy." More often, our "other gospel" has been a form of rationalism. By "rationalism" I do not mean being rational or reasonable; I mean the assumption that our salvation is primarily dependent on our reason, i.e., the correct apprehension of doctrines logically inferred from scripture. Many of our people realize they cannot be good enough or do enough to be saved. But many of us still feel we can, and in fact do, *know* enough to be saved. By and large our hope of salvation has been in our brains and in our ability to draw all the correct inferences, not in our good works.

Further, from this perspective, no brain is too feeble to understand what is necessary to be saved. "Doctrine" therefore assumes the lowest common level of understanding: thus the frustration of the adult Bible school teacher who takes the task seriously. He or she learns quickly that students are open to learning new facts (e.g., where Paul went from Corinth), to being encouraged to do good works, and to being reminded of doctrinal truths they already know and by which they were saved. But they are often not so open to the idea that there are important "doctrines" of which they may be unaware or mistaken. If there were such, the rationalist's state of salvation would be in doubt.

In effect, we have, ironically, exaggerated the importance of theology by confusing it (in the form of "doctrine") with the basis of salvation. The adult Bible class teacher soon learns it is foolhardy to challenge the basis of salvation of one who has been saved for twenty or thirty years.

"Theology" in the traditional sense, i.e., "faith seeking understanding" (Anselm, Augustine), cannot fare well among congregations where this atmosphere prevails. The fact of the matter is faith and salvation are the prerequisites, not the result of theology. Theology begins where God has met us and seeks rationally to understand what he has done for us and what that means for our understanding of the whole of reality.

The fact is, of course, like everyone else, people in Churches of Christ have always done theology and thought very highly of the results. They simply have called it "doctrine" instead of "theology" and, often, have denied their part in its formulation by assuming that correct doctrine involves no interpretation whatever. Calling theology "doctrine" is fine if that is the term on which we are to agree. Denying our part in its formulation is dangerous, however, and leads to a fatal theological faux pas which runs through the whole history of our movement. We have confused right thinking with salvation and,

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therefore, have sought to keep right thinking simple ("that the wayfaring man though a fool may not err therein") and potentially universal ("having the same mind").

Above all things we Americans, especially we Americans who are children of frontier Restoration Movements, want our theology ("doctrine") to be plain, simple, lucid, and (need it be said) "practical." It is not enough that the Gospel be simple and salvation free; theology must also be simple and

struggle-free — an almost effortless enterprise requiring little education and no expertise whatever. What the Christian is to believe about everything from baptism to predestination is so instantaneously obvious that no one could misunderstand it “without a little help.” And further, if it is not readily understandable, it is not important. The sons and daughters of common sense rationalism want a religion so rationally un-misunderstandable that “the wayfaring man, though a fool, shall not err therein” (Isa. 35:8).

The popularity of Isaiah’s “wayfaring man” saying in this context is both comical and tragic. It is comical because so many quote a passage which they may have misunderstood (if most contemporary translators are correct)³ to prove the scripture is too simple to be misunderstood. Isaiah evidently does not mean the way is so simple. The simple person cannot fall off; he means the way is of such a character fools cannot get on it. To be simple and to be a fool are not necessarily the same thing, as Isaiah undoubtedly understood.

The tragedy is that such misunderstood proof texts are used to mislead people about the importance of scholarship and theology. The disparaging of scholarship and theological inquiry simply is not necessary for salvation or for the preservation of simple piety, and those of us responsible for teaching and shepherding the people of God should never leave the slightest such impression.

Salvation is simple (though profound) and is the loving activity of God, which may be freely enjoyed by all through the work of Jesus Christ. Right thinking is not simple; it is an immensely complex activity hampered by our universal ignorance and profoundly complicated by our universal sinfulness. No human being, no matter how gifted intellectually and morally, can possibly know what is right perfectly any more than he can do what is right perfectly. But any human being, no matter how deficient intellectually or morally, can be made perfectly whole without spot or blemish by God.

That is the difference between salvation and theology. Theology does not save anyone. Theology is merely our feeble, human attempts to understand

how we are being saved. But we should not put too much weight on the word “merely” in this context. Our feeble human attempts to comprehend and to explicate how we are being saved are extremely important. They are not as important as being saved, but they are important.

Often in the history of our movement, theology, even biblical theology,⁴ has been considered an unprofitable pursuit at best, or an enemy of simple, trusting faith at worst. The salvation of theology for members of Churches of Christ requires a serious rethinking of our theology of salvation. Put simply, if we are ever going to know the relationship between “theology” and our salvation, we are going to have to be clear, first, about how we are being saved. We can then proceed to discover what “theology” is and how it is related to the salvation we are experiencing.

We need a massive, healthy dose of the Gospel, accompanied by widespread comprehension of our salvation “by grace through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God.” Once our security is firmly

rooted in God and not in theology, then theology can be set free to do its work, enhancing our experience of salvation rather than threatening it. In Churches of Christ the salvation of theology depends heavily on a healthier, more biblical theology of salvation.

Thomas Torrance alleges that, “Biblical interpretation and theological understanding clearly go hand in hand together.”⁵ What is clear to Torrance has not always been clear to us in the Restoration Movement. If God is absolute truth, then we must go ultimately to him for our truth. The scriptures arise out of the process of self-revelation for which God chose the people of Israel and for which he came to us in Jesus Christ. We cannot know him except as we take seriously the scriptures which are the means of his continuing self-revelation.

What God is revealing, however, is not merely “doctrinal” information about himself. What God is revealing is himself. God starts with himself, not with us, not with doctrine, not even with the scripture—but with himself. In our thought and action as the Church, we also must start and end with God. Otherwise, even our biblical interpretations will be false because they will be rooted in something other

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than God and his truth.

Biblical interpretation seeks the truth. But the results of biblical interpretation are not the truth. God is still the truth. Our interpretation of the scriptures must be done continuously "in the light of the knowledge of God which he continues to mediate to us in and through them."⁶ At no point in this process can we claim to "have" the truth, much less can we claim *exclusive* possession of truth, without invalidating the concept of truth itself.

To commit ourselves to God in faith ... means that we let ourselves be called so radically in question that we are stripped of all our presuppositions and prejudgments. We let the truth of God retain its own majesty ... in all our biblical interpretation and doctrinal formulations, for it constitutes a realm over which we can never exercise any rule or control. It is in the ultimate truth of God, then, that authority resides, and not in those who seek to interpret it, or in a set of doctrines that might substitute for it ...⁷

Even sixteenth and seventeenth century Puritans, though not particularly known for theological liberalism or fuzzy thinking, were very good at making this distinction. Thomas Hooker (1586-1647) admirably expressed a biblical-theologically chastened view of his own grasp of truth:

My only aim ... is to lay down ... the grounds of our practice according to the measure of light I have received ... the sum is, we doubt not what we practice, but it is beyond all doubt that all men are liars and we are in the number of those poor feeble men; either we do or may err, though we do not know it; what we have learned we do profess, and yet profess still to live that we may learn.⁸

Even the doctrine of justification by grace, itself, is not absolute truth. It is a doctrine about truth. What it says about truth is that God's salvation is not acquired through human attainment or merit; it is through "unmerited favor" (Campbell). That is true about all our relations with God, including both moral and religious relations. Just as we are not saved by good works; we are also not saved by correct doctrinal thinking.

"... we can never claim to have right or truth in ourselves but may find our right and truth only in Christ."⁹

With respect to doctrine, justification by grace means, at least: "... we may never claim the truth for our own statements, but must rather think of our statements as pointing away to Christ, who

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alone is the Truth."¹⁰

Since God is truth and not we ourselves, nothing we do is infallible. That includes our biblical interpretation, our worship designs, our church organizing. "... we may not boast of our orthodoxy or be dogmatic about our interpretations and formulations."¹¹

Such an understanding is certainly humbling—and fittingly so. But it should be distressing only to those who seek to be justified by some other means than the unmerited favor of God ("ye are fallen from grace" Gal. 5:4). As in the case of lawkeeping, Christians should be relieved and grateful that we are lovingly spared from the intolerable burden of needing to be perfectly and exclusively right. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 7:25).

The scriptures themselves seem to consistently affirm this humbling and liberating perspective. They can be made to affirm otherwise only if we begin with the scriptures as primarily law or abstract doctrine—rather than as witness to the living God and his son, Jesus Christ.

This radical understanding of the relation between justification and truth has been fitfully acknowledged in the more mature reflections of our own "pioneers." Walter Scott, for instance, declares our problem is we have forfeited our life and blood through our sin. Therefore: "Redemption is not by truth, law, logic, or moral suasion, but by the blood—the blood of the cross—the blood of the Son of God."¹²

The biblical personality who exhibits most clearly an intellectualistic or rationalistic view of truth is Pontius Pilate. "What is truth?," he asked, unable to comprehend that his question was addressed to the

Truth Himself. Thus Pilate misses the whole point about truth. Similarly, though not quite as intellectualistic as the pagan philosophers, many Jewish Bible scholars could not see the truth for their intense concern for correct biblical interpretation. They evidently were properly convinced of the importance of scriptures, but they badly misunderstood why they were important: "You search the scriptures; for in them you think you have eternal life; and they are they which bear witness to me. And you will not come to me, that you may have life" (John 5:39-40).

This is indeed an interesting picture that throws light on our situation as a movement. No one searches the scriptures more than we (or, at least, used to do). Yet our testimony to him has often been obscured by our testimony to the scriptures themselves, or to the Church, or to right doctrine. All of these latter things are divinely ordained and transcendently important; but they are not the truth, they point to the truth. Misunderstanding that is not an insignificant error. It leads to more tragic consequences for our relationship to God and to our fellowship with his redeemed people than almost any other error.

A church-centered or a doctrine-centered gospel, or even one centered on inspired writings, is another gospel. It obscures the truth of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ by obscuring Christ himself; and it therefore skews the proper relationship between the Gospel and the Church and between the Gospel and correct thinking about the Gospel (doctrine or theology).

In the Bible, truth is a quality which properly belongs to God. God is the God of truth. "Truth means essentially reliability, dependableness, ability to perform what is required."¹³

The Hebrew word (*emeth*, *emunah*) is sometimes translated "faithfulness," as in Hosea 2:20. As Hosea can certainly testify, it is not the people of God who have the truth in this sense. It is God alone who is faithful, who has the truth. From Hosea's perspective it is the miracle of God's steadfast love that God continues to be faithful to a people who do not have the truth. He calls them not to "have the truth" in some intellectual way. He calls them to belong to the truth and acknowledge him as Lord. To an unfaithful wife, God says:

I will be true and faithful.
I will show you steadfast love and mercy.
And make you mine forever.
I will keep my promise and
make you mine. And you will acknowl-
edge me as Lord. (Hosea 2:19-20)

In God truth and mercy go together (Gen. 32:10 Ps. 25:10, 108:4, etc.). Truth is certainly the character of God; but we know this only through what he in mercy does. Similarly, truth is something God demands of his people. Not that God's people have possession of truth by which they meet God's requirement, but they are commanded to *do* the truth. "What does God require of you?, but to *love* mercy, to *do* justice and to *walk* humble with your God" (Micah 6:8).

The scriptures require me to believe the truth, know the truth, obey the truth, be in the truth, have the truth in me, walk according to the truth, be of the truth, speak the truth, receive the truth, do the truth, love the truth, bear witness to the truth, and rejoice in the truth. They do not require me to claim to have exclusive truth; they in fact forbid me to make such a claim: "For now we see through a glass, darkly, but *then* face to face. Now I know in part; but *then* shall I know even as also I am known" (I Corinthians 13:12).

On doctrinal matters, as Paul cautions us (in I Cor. 8: 1-3), "we know that all of us possess knowledge. But knowledge puffs up; love builds up." "Anyone who claims to know something or claims to have superior knowledge (Knox), that person does not yet know what he needs to know. But anyone who loves God is known by *Him*" (RSV).

We all know those scriptures. Most of us know them by heart. Why then are they not more prominently known as "Church of Christ" doctrine? Why do we continue to err so often by claiming to know what cannot be known, by claiming the prerogative of judgment that does not belong to us?

Why can we not be content to be known by God, to know *whom* we have believed, to fellowship with those whom he has chosen? These questions imply an incredible challenge, the detailed implications of which we will undoubtedly disagree about.

But meanwhile, if the claim to exclusive truth is irrational and delusory because it is not a human possibility, and if it is biblically and theologically erroneous, even idolatrous, then giving it up should be no real task for rational, biblical Christians.

What then is left? Do we have a right to exist if we relinquish claim to exclusive truth? My thesis implies we really have no right to exist for the purpose of claiming exclusive truth. If the people of God in the Bible (Israel or the Church) could not legitimately claim exclusive truth because of the very nature of truth itself, then why do we not, like them, continue to have a right to exist by the grace of God.

"Restoration" movements throughout history are movements within the Church of Christ, the

Body of Christ. That is their glory. The Church of Christ always needs movements, especially movements of reform and restoration. Their shame is the humanistic and pharisaical tendency to come to the conclusion that they and they alone have arrived at complete truth and constitute, by themselves, the whole Church of Christ.

The "restoration" of the Church of Christ to what God intends it to be is the goal for which Christ died and toward which the Spirit is continually moving us. It is not an accomplishment of ours. It is certainly not something of which the Church can boast as being done in the present or past. The restoration ("apokatastasis")¹⁴ about which the New Testament speaks is a movement to reconcile all things in heaven and earth, in which there is no longer Jew or Greek, bond or free, male or female,

but all are one in Christ Jesus. It is a movement which culminates in the breaking down of every wall, the bowing of every knee to Christ, and the submission of everything to God so that he might be All in All.

My conclusion would be that we do not have a right to exist as merely another exclusivist sect or obscurantist denomination. But if we are willing to be the Body of Christ in the world, why not? My plea is merely that we join fully the Christian race; that we quit claiming what we never should have claimed in the first place if we had had our spiritual wits about us; that we simply be God's servants in the world, and that with God's help, we try as best we can to recognize and uphold the hands of his other servants. Then who would have more right to continue to exist than we?